The Lord Be with You And with Your Spirit

Dr. Gifford A. Grobien

The pastor and congregation greet each other toward the beginning of the Divine Service and in other services prior to the prayers. “The Lord be with you.” Jesus be with you. Where two or three are gathered in His name, there Christ is in their midst.

Here is the Church, whether in a grand church building or hidden in a small house. The people gather around the preaching of Christ and His sacraments, and He is present to forgive them. This work of preaching, of administering sacraments, of forgiving—this is the work of the preacher. It is a blessed and joyous work. Yet we should not be deceived. It can be difficult; it can face opposition, even from some of those who are gathered; it can be subject to persecution.

Ministry requires preparation, not only in the knowledge of theology, but in the practice of theology. Ministers must learn steadfastness in the face of difficulty. This steadfastness cannot be developed on one’s own, as if the minister could muster up enough strength to resist opposition. Steadfastness in the Church actually comes about through giving up self-reliance in order to receive the sufficient grace of Jesus Christ. Christian steadfastness depends upon humility. Christian steadfastness depends upon receiving the grace and gifts of Christ.

The minister also then needs to grow continually in his own humble receptivity of the Gospel. He needs to grow in repentance and faith. And he does this in the same way as all Christians: through the Church’s services of prayer, preaching, absolution and the Lord’s Supper.

For this reason, the services of Kramer Chapel are central to the life of a seminarian. Services are held three or four times each weekday. No attendance is kept or required; rather, the community prays with such frequency and regularity such that all are invited. In these services the Word of Jesus is read and preached. In these services the people call upon Jesus in prayer to bear their burdens, to care for loved ones and to offer thanksgiving for His benefits.

The full variety of the services of the hymnal are used. This has two purposes. First, it introduces students to all the resources of the Lutheran Service Book, so that they are familiar with all of the ways they can serve their congregations with it. Second, it offers the benefits of all these services to the students themselves. The services and liturgy are not just a learning opportunity for the students; they are formative. The services offer the forgiveness and life of Christ to the students themselves so they are strengthened and made steadfast for their ministries.
In this personal speaking of the Gospel, students, staff, faculty and others hear again of Christ’s great mercy and are strengthened in faith and love.

So if you’ve never sung one of the divine services, you’ll sing it here and you’ll receive the benefits of it at the same time. If you’ve never used any of the several prayer services, you’ll pray it here, not only calling on the help of God but receiving it from the preached Word.

Of great blessing to the community are the services of Corporate Confession and Absolution. Evenings prior to a day when the Divine Service will be celebrated, the community is invited to pray the rite from LSB. Included in the rite is the reading of the Christian Questions and Answers from the Small Catechism, encouraging us not only to examine ourselves for sin, but to consider the great mercy of Christ as He comes to us in the Sacrament. And while the confession is corporate, the presiding minister then absolves each person individually by name. In this personal speaking of the Gospel, students, staff, faculty and others hear again of Christ’s great mercy and are strengthened in faith and love.

In these services, students experience in a concentrated way the ministry that they will someday go forth and offer to others in their congregations and missions. The services at Kramer Chapel do what they are foremost intended to do: forgive the sins of those who attend. Yet, they also complement the educational setting by serving as an example of pastoral care for those who will go forth to serve in and assist the caring office of the ministry.

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Wurschmidt Named Admission Counselor

Rev. Randall P. Wurschmidt was a church musician before becoming a pastor. He studied music history at the University of the Pacific, Stockton, Calif. (B.M.) and Boston University (M.M.). As a Fulbright Scholar he spent a year studying organ performance at the Musikhochschule in Lübeck, Germany. He graduated from Concordia Theological Seminary in 2008 and served as pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Overgaard, Ariz., until 2012, when he accepted the call to serve the seminary as an admission counselor. He is married to Carolina and has three children, Garin, Anna and David.
An Ancient Heresy in Modern Vesture

Rev. Andrew T. Yeager

Gnosticism came to full bloom as a coherent movement in the 2nd century and, like a latent cancer quickly becomes malignant, its scope of influence grew rapidly to haunt the Church. No less than the pens of the Church’s greatest saints, those of Origen and Hippolytus, Irenaeus and Tertullian, were enlisted to finally squelch Gnosticism’s influence. This arduous battle of orthodoxy versus heresy, the Church versus the Gnostics, spanned several generations.

Gnosticism wasn’t a religion of its own but latched itself onto other religions—those of Egypt and Persia and Mesopotamia and finally, Christianity. It characteristically grew like a parasite grows off its host, or like poison ivy spindles its winding threads up a healthy tree to choke it of its life. Gnosticism would hijack the terms of one religion, such as pòistis (faith), and imbue them with a meaning that was alien to the original meaning and use of the word. Therefore, the early Gnostics were syncretists, blending together worlds of thought, mixing together elements of religion that held nothing in common and were never intended to be comingled.

So what has Gnosticism to do with the Church today? Should we fear that an ancient heresy some 1,800 years old could have an effect on the faith and life of our brothers and sisters with whom we now live? The Augsburg Confession has some wisdom for us. For, in the Augustana, section 1, the Samosetenes, teachers within the Church representing the radical left-wing of the Reformation who taught falsely about the Trinity (that the Word and the Holy Spirit were not distinct persons), were condemned as heretics. The Samosetenes were essentially teaching heresy that was similar to that of their Gnostic forebears who wrote some thousand years before them. Even centuries later the Lutherans who represented the orthodox Christian position were still battling with heretical ideas that were not dead and buried, but were, to the contrary, very much alive.

Modern liberal theology does present some challenges to the Church and many modern teachings do have much in common with gnostic theology. Let’s take a look at some similarities.

The Gnostics claimed that there was a higher, more esoteric (secret) knowledge that could only be attained by the highly spiritual. Here, enlightenment from within trumps revelation from without. This concept was strongly refuted by the Reformation that claimed salvation came to a person extrò nos, from outside us, from the Word of God to our ears, not from inside us from a secret knowledge perceived by the heart. Bad theology tells one to “follow your heart.” When the case is made for women’s ordination and homosexual unions based on how we “feel” about the issue, and proponents of both appeal to our emotions rather than the Word of God, the firm foundation of the externum verbum, the external Word of God has been lost.

Gnostic theology had no use for the Old Testament and relegated much of its history to the realm of allegory. Some scholars who find the history of the Creation, the Flood, the stories of Jonah and David and Samson too unbelievable will excuse these unfortunate stories as allegories or stories that are only representations having abstract spiritual meanings. However, the Church has always firmly held to a literal and historical interpretation, knowing full well that should you lose the literal interpretation, you reject the whole narrative, and put the reader’s faith in jeopardy. If you give up a literal interpretation of the Flood on the grounds that the story is too incredible, what then will you do with the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection? Reject these things and what then becomes of faith itself?

For that reason we give Him thanks and praise for the Office of the Holy Ministry, even as we petition Him unendingly to send faithful pastors into our lands with the sure Gospel on their lips, so that we too may hear, believe, repent and be saved.

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The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.”

Ezekiel 37:1-14 ESV

Return to Eden! Back to the Garden! Thus the cry of the people of God; the cry through the centuries; the cry through the Church from age to age. Return to Eden! Back to the Garden! Return to the Promised Land! Hold to the narrow path and enter the everlasting gates! Return to Eden!

Ah, but the land lies desolate, barren in the desert winds. The streets of the city are no longer a habitat for humanity, rather a home for the wild beasts and the carrion birds of prey of the wilderness. The Holy Place is no more, not one stone left upon another. Brambles choke the street. Thorns and briars have overaken the vineyard. Death and destruction are all around. Where is Eden? Where is the Garden? Where is the Holy City with the Holy Place? Where is the pleasant planting of the LORD?

The bones of the people litter the valley, dried up, lifeless in the scorching heat of the evil day. They are very dry. Can these bones live? Can life return to ones such as these? Can they be raised? Can they return to the garden from which they were driven? They are very dry; there is no life in them. Can these bones live? O LORD God, You know!

Indeed, the LORD God knows! He who created the life of man and blew His breath into his nostrils, He knows. He who speaks His Word and the wind and the waves obey, He knows. He who sends forth His Spirit to bring forth life, He knows. He who is the commander of life and death, demands that these bones live! “Prophesy to the bones, send forth My Word, let My breath enter into them!” And the rattling together begins.
Though sin, death and Satan had sucked the life juices from us all and we were very dry; though the slings and arrows of the wicked one had driven us into the pit; though the torments of our flesh and blood and the drama of our godless world had despaired us of all hope, the Spirit still hovered over the deep waiting to bring life. And the LORD declares, “Let there be life!” “I will cause breath to enter into you and you shall live.” Those who despaired of hope, who were clean cut off, are given new life. Those whose flesh has been destroyed shall now from their flesh see God. Life and its flesh and blood are restored by the sacrificed flesh and blood of the Holy One of God. Life and the Spirit's breath are breathed into the dead as the Holy One breathes His last. Life and the hope it brings is restored by the One who is the hope of us all.

O death where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory? His tomb was empty and we, too, shall be raised. The flesh of our Old Adam has been destroyed in the waters, and the flesh of our New Adam has been raised up that we might see God. We, who once despaired of hope, are restored with the hope of the resurrection. We, who once were held captive behind the gates of hell, are freed to enter through the gates of everlasting life.

Go, preach, teach, baptize—the Spirit of the LORD has been poured out upon you; the Spirit of the LORD now dwells within you. Know that the LORD is God for He has opened your graves and raised you up, for just as Christ was raised from the dead, so you also shall rise. Your dry bones have been revived by the breath; the new life of the Spirit is yours. Return to Eden, for the gates of the Promised Land stand open before you; back to the Garden, for the flaming sword of the Cherubim has been quenched. Return to Eden for the Holy City is yours. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

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Another element of Gnosticism emphasizes the duality of the spiritual life and the material life, calling the spiritual life good and the material life evil. In Gnostic thought a person wasn’t saved from sin, but from the trappings of the material world. Today Christians are faced with a difficult and challenging question from liberalism. As one CTS professor puts it, “is my body of flesh and blood essential to what it means to be me?” Moderns say the “I” is something distinct from the particularities of the body. Therefore, what we do with our bodies through augmentation or by enlisting them in all kinds of unnatural uses are seen as adiaphora—what really matters is the mind. What does it matter what I do with my body? My body is not who I am! Male and female, our different genders, are neither here nor there, rather the sexes are arbitrary differences to be overcome. Therefore a spirit of libertinism and antinomianism pervades modern church bodies thanks to a resurgence of Gnosticism among us. Against this old, tired heresy cloaked as novel, scientifically-enlightened thought, the Church ought to take up the simple assertion of the Creed, that the Son of God took on flesh and was made Man. Therefore our flesh is indeed essential to who we are, because our God took on flesh. His life gives meaning to ours.

Gnostics were antinomian, having no use for the Law with its moral demands. While Gnostics seek the life lived on a higher, spiritual plane, the demands of conventional morality are ridiculed and trivialized. Gnostics are free to disregard moral obligations and live a libertine lifestyle, because the material life means nothing at best and the trappings of a material world were considered evil. The actions of the body mean nothing and therefore, the Law, when it speaks of injunctions against the use of the body immorally—drunkenness, perversion and the like, can be disregarded. Does modern theology take a firm stance on temptations such as cohabitation before marriage, pornography or any other besetting sins which enslave sinners? Today, the Law is eschewed for more tolerant, tone-friendly messages which serve to please the masses. Is the Law ever preached in its full sternness, as Dr. Walther urges pastors to do in his Law & Gospel?

Gnostics rejected scriptural authority, claiming that knowledge was to be perceived on a higher plane than that where the spoken word is heard and received. Modern ecclesiastical types parading as Christian theologians have asserted that the Scriptures are not to be the final authority in matters such as women’s ordination and homosexual marriage. The Christ of faith is divided from Jesus of Nazareth and His words, therefore, the Scriptures which bear the words of Jesus of Nazareth cannot be the inspired, inerrant Word of God. There is a higher, more exclusive gnosis to be gained from the Christ of faith and only the enlightened can grasp it.

Humble, pious Christians take the Bible to be the inspired, inerrant Word of God. They take Jesus at His words and hold to their simple, straightforward meaning. Liberal theology believes that the faith of these Christians is unenlightened and that such a faith will not guarantee advancement to the higher step of “finding the grace of God in Christ,” (as one liberal document says). This is modern Gnosticism, cloaked in modern liberal parlance. We can see how this ancient heresy has reared its head to come back once more and attack the Church. Such liberals claim to have the Holy Spirit over against the mass of unenlightened Christians who only have recourse to the mere prophetic and apostolic writings, the Scriptures. Liberals dismiss the Scriptures as being either unclear, culturally conditioned or time bound.3

There are no new heresies. But make no mistake, it is the nature of heresy to recur. Here we find ancient heresy in modern apparel, and the Church will do well to guard herself against it by enlisting her finest troops to do battle against it, as had been done by saints from countless generations ago.

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June 16-29, 2013
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